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## A FEW WORDS FROM AUSTRALIA.

BY WILLIAM HOWITT.

*McIvor Diggings, Victoria, July 1, 1853.*

ON my arrival in Australia, I found the ignorance of the British public extreme as to the actual state of affairs there. Consequently the whole body of passengers in the Kent, in which I came out, were in great consternation at the discovery which they made. The astounding price of everything; the astounding charges for conveying luggage from the ship to the town wharf, and again from the wharf to any quarter of the city, amounting to more than the freight all the way from London thither, 16,000 miles. The next to impossibility of procuring the meanest lodgings, at rates for which you might almost take a house in Belgrave-square; the charge of five shillings a week for permission to pitch a tent on the waste lands near the town; and the discount, at that time, of 20 per cent. taken on Bank of England notes. I immediately wrote to a leading morning paper stating this fact, and the letter had, as I learn, great effect. I have seen many gentlemen here who thanked me for so opportunely putting them on their guard, inducing them to bring out more money with them, and that in gold, by which they had avoided much difficulty and loss.

But there still needs a warning voice, and that a loud one, addressed to the thousands and tens of thousands who are still thronging towards this colony, in the certain belief of making a speedy fortune at the diggings. It appears from the newspapers, that the gold mania is still on the increase—has not yet even reached its height, and that it is only the limited number of ships procurable for the voyage which prevents a still greater number of enthusiastic adventurers from rushing to the shores of this Austral El Dorado. I do not suppose that any warning, any sober statement of real fact, will check this mania till it has run its course. Like the railway mania, it will drive on its victims till there has been such an amount of misery and disappointment, as shall drown and overpower even the clamorous voices of interested parties, and the thirst for the sudden acquisition of wealth. As I have come out here, however, partly to make myself personally acquainted with the whole gold and gold-digging question, and, having done that, to make the public acquainted with it, I should not feel that I was fulfilling my mission towards my fellow-countrymen if, even at this stage of my progress, I did not endeavour at least to set them right as to the prospects which this colony really holds out to emigrants.

I will begin, therefore, at once by stating that those florid and extravagant accounts which have been sent out from Victoria to all quarters of the world, of fortunes to be made, and that in a very brief time, by gold-digging, are empty, base, and fallacious. In Lord Denman's phrase, they are "a delusion, a mockery, and a snare." They are more—they are a gross delusion, a cruel mockery, a most fatal and inevitable snare!

I do not mean to say that there is not gold, and a great deal of gold, in Victoria. The quantities announced from time to time as having arrived in London, the ten tons at once landed from the Australian, and the large nuggets from Balaarat, are sufficient evidence of that. But what I mean to say is, that this gold is not found in such quantities, or with such ease, as was represented by the enraptured Victorians, and in the despatches of the governor before I left England—statements which, taken literally, would induce any one to believe that he had nothing to do but to come over to Mount Alexander or Bendigo, shovel up a heap of gold in a week or two, and return home. Such accounts, I presume, must still be circulated in England, or the mania of emigration could not run so astonishingly high as it appears to do. When I was down in Melbourne a few weeks ago, no less than six thousand persons arrived in one week in that port alone from England. The environs of the town were covered with tents, as with the camp of a hostile army; those being the only places in which the newly-arrived could find shelter. The town was crowded, nay, rather glutted with people. Single rooms were letting for £6 per week, and the price of everything was as fabulous—high as ever. Bread, 3s. a quarter loaf; butter,

4s. a pound; flour, £3 10s. a bag; hay, £60 a ton; oats, £1 a bushel; boots, £4 a pair; firewood, £3 a cart-load; bricks for building, which, in 1843, were 8s. a thousand, £12 10s. a thousand; and so on. The inhabitants are at their wits' end to know where all the people thus arriving, at the rate of a thousand a day, were to be lodged, and the newspapers gave the most harrowing accounts of the miseries which these new *arrivés* were suffering, from being turned out on the wharves at evening amidst the darkness and the drenching rains of winter, and not knowing where to find a shelter for their heads. I refer you to those accounts in the papers themselves.

Now all these people come out flushed with the hope of certain and speedy fortune at the diggings, and are, of course, wofully disappointed. I have seen scores returning almost immediately to England, denouncing in no measured terms the imposition which had been practised upon them. I have seen and conversed with hundreds, and I rarely found the man who was not complaining of having been grievously deceived by the accounts sent to England of the country, of the climate, and of the enormously remunerative nature of the gold fields. In fact, there has been a great deal of what is vulgarly called *gammou* played off by interested parties, to draw a population to this colony. The climate has been represented as perfection, as something quite ethereal; the land of "unrivalled fertility"—that is the favourite phrase—and the means of personal aggrandisement as boundless.

All this has been a false and foolish policy, because the country, the climate, and the capacity of the colony for enriching its inhabitants, properly and fairly stated, are sufficiently good to draw a large body of emigrants, and to make them prosperous. The evil is not in the country, but in the false colours in which unprincipled speculators and land-jobbers have arrayed it. The mischief has been, and is, not in people coming to this country, but in coming to it under the influence of exaggerated and false representations, and thence imbibing a disgust for what, under other circumstances, would have pleased and remunerated them. The climate certainly is not perfection, but taken in the whole circle of the year, is a very fine climate. The land is not all of unrivalled fertility—there are millions and millions of acres of perhaps as sorry land as the world can show—but still there is plenty of fine land, and that lying near the coast, while the rest is well adapted for huge herds of cattle and flocks of sheep to roam over at large, and to supply the colony with meat, and England with wool. What is wanted to prevent disappointment, and to insure satisfaction, comfort, and prosperity in the great body of emigrants, is simply that they should know really the truth of things—the truth divested of all false colouring, whether that of interested speculation, of *colour-de-rose* enthusiasm, or of disgust generated by imposition. There are thousands who have come hither and failed, and who have gone back cursing the country and those whose florid descriptions had brought them to it, who, had they come with correct views of what they really might expect, would have had no cause to regret their visit to Victoria. I shall, therefore, in a few remarks on gold-digging, on the climate, and on the real prospects of advantage which the colony holds out to emigrants, endeavour to prevent, as far as in me lies, future false expectations and consecutive disappointment.

I repeat it, then, that gold-digging is not the road to fortune in this country. I have seen plenty of people who have enriched themselves, and some in a comparatively short time, in trade; in occupying squatting stations, that is, being sheep and cattle farmers; and in speculations in land, chiefly in town allotments; but I have never yet met with that man who has made a fortune by gold-digging. It is true, I have heard marvellous stories of such men, and still more marvellous ones of wonders doing on the diggings, but in every instance when I have searched these miracles to the bottom—and I have made it my business on all occasions to do so—they have resolved themselves into MOONSHINE. Such stories are often very wonderful on the diggings themselves; no wonder then that they are very marvellous by the time they reach Mel-

bourne, and most irresistibly splendid by the time they reach England. I have now been more than nine months in the colony, have travelled at least 700 miles to different diggings, furnished with letters from the governor himself, and others of the most influential men in the country, to the gold commissioners in the gold fields; living in intimacy with those gentlemen, and also going familiarly amongst the working diggers, so that I have had every means of testing the truth or falsehood of these marvellous stories; and the result has been that everything marvellous has vanished, and a stern reality has remained behind.

Let us take as a sample of the fortunes of gold-diggers, or rather of gentlemen coming hither to assume that character, the cabin passengers of the ship in which I sailed. These amounted to about twenty-four, and of these something more than half tried their fortunes at digging, or on the diggings. The rest, intimidated by the accounts which they heard in Melbourne of the hardships and the little profit attending digging, settled down in Melbourne, in situations or in business for themselves. All of these, or nearly all, have done well. One of the most confident men whom I have heard of as coming out, avowedly to try his fortune as a digger, was in this same ship. During the voyage he was amongst the most sanguine regarding the fortunes to be made of the whole company, and full of schemes for going a-head up the country, far beyond the ordinary diggings, and there finding hitherto unexplored treasures, and coming down again loaded with them. The information which he received in Melbourne at once cooled his enthusiasm, and he never ventured to the diggings except on an experimental trip or two in the private escort. Since then, he has been hanging about in Melbourne importuning the government for a post, and just now, that is, after nine months' waste of time, has been sent up to the diggings as an assistant gold commissioner—a sort of respectable banishment, but by no means a profitable one. The rest of those who at once cut all idea of the diggings have done well in trade.

And what have the digging moiety done? With the exception of ourselves, only two of them have done anything at all. One of these two made a short campaign at Balaarat pretty successfully, but was soon convinced that he could do much better with far less labour, and having good banking connexions in the colony, settled down as a gold-broker, and is making a large income. The other individual was the doctor of the ship, who succeeded at the diggings, not by digging, but by practising. The rest speedily abandoned the diggings in disgust, and some of them made the best of their way home. One gentleman, who was all enthusiasm on the voyage, and declared that he would go up to the diggings and would not come down again for two years, we met on his way back before we reached the gold-fields, most indignant at what he called the hoax that had been played off upon him, at the diggings, and by the climate. He had found the only men almost who could procure any gold, working under a blazing sun up to the middle in cold water—intensely cold water running from the mountains: they were, at once, streaming with perspiration and chilled in their lower extremities as with the chill of death. They were obliged to work day and night by turns, in parties of from fourteen to twenty, to keep the water down, while the black ooze at the bottom of their holes stunk as vilely as any sewer. He himself had suffered severely in his health, and was nearly blind with the ophthalmia, occasioned by the intolerable swarms of flies, which are the curse of the country during the summer months. This gentleman lost no time in shipping himself back to England, where he would arrive at last £500 the worse for his expedition.

Others of our fellow-passengers were not far behind him on their way back, quite satisfied with the taste they had had of the gold-fields. Two others were not so fortunate; they died on the field, one of them a medical gentleman of very extensive knowledge, who had built so much on the golden fables which had drawn him out, that on seeing with his own eyes the miserable reality, his spirits gave way, and he died in a very short time from sheer dejection of spirits. One of my first

visits at the Ovens diggings was to his grave in the bush. Such have been the fortunes of the cabin passengers of one ship. Of the intermediates I know little; but I have heard of none that have had much success; but of one, a healthy young man, who died from the bite of a centipede at the gold-fields, and of a widow lady, whose three children were all swept away by the country fever in a very few weeks.

Such, I say, have been the fortunes of the passengers of that one ship—such, I doubt not, would be pretty much that of most ships which arrive here. In fact, numbers on coming into port, and learning the real state of things, have never quitted their ships at all, but taken their passage back in the same vessels. But what is the fact? If these gentlemen of whom I have been speaking had come out truly informed as to the country and its capabilities, they might every one of them have done well. Instead of being the victims of the gold-digging delusion, they would have engaged in the trade of the place, and might have made fortunes. But they were possessed by a delusion, most culpably fostered by interested parties; and in their disgust they turned away from the colony, altogether incapable of seeing the truly golden opportunities at their feet in the shape of trade, or in trafficking in town allotments.

The sooner, therefore, that the gold-digging delusion is got rid of the better, and that certainly would not continue long if the people in England really knew what going to the diggings meant. It seems a very easy thing in England, with railroads and good macadamised highways, to go some eighty or a hundred miles, and just dig a few holes of four or five feet deep, as is generally represented, and pick up heaps of gold and great dazzling nuggets. But I will tell you a little of what it is to get up to the diggings in a country which has neither roads nor bridges, but plenty of bogs and rugged mountains to cross, and deep gullies and streams to get through. We ourselves have now been nine months in the colony, and it has taken up *five* months of that time in travelling, *or rather straggling*, to the diggings. We have had a cart with a couple of good horses to carry our tent and effects; we have had letters to the principal settlers on the different roads, and every possible advantage; yet, spite of all this, and of the determination to flinch from nothing, till we had accomplished our object, such has been the rate of our progress. Last summer we went to the Ovens diggings, which were represented to be 150 miles off. We found them 220. We found the roads, or rather tracks—for roads, as I have said, there are none—so frightful from deep bogs, steep and rocky hills, deep ravines, and unbridged streams and rivers, that after the most arduous exertions—loading and unloading, digging our cart out of bogs and dragging it by slow degrees over hills, seeing bullock drays smashed ever and anon in the road, and horses and bullocks lying dead, killed in the vain endeavour to get along—our own vehicle broke down midway, and we were, as it were, pinned to the ground, with no means of getting away, in a burning desert where the sun was, from day to day, at 120° in our tent, and compelled to drink stagnant water, till we were all, more or less, attacked with dysentery. For myself I was very near giving up the ghost there; and I doubt whether any of us would have got away alive, had we not found the house of a hospitable settler not far off, who at once came and removed us thither. We reached the diggings in *two months*, and found that there was nothing to be done there, so we made our way right a-head up the untracked bush towards the Snowy Mountains, where we dug for two months with as much success as most find. But we were soon tracked and followed—followed by thousands, for such is the vast number of people now in the diggings—I suppose not less than 200,000—that competition is as hot and severe as it is in any city in Europe. At every rumour of anything being found on any particular spot, there is a *rush*, as it is called, of hundreds and thousands; the ground for many acres' extent is literally torn to pieces under the feet and spades of the throng, and it is utterly impossible that any one man can appropriate to himself any great quantity of gold.